

2010

A Black Market for Magical Bones: The Current Plight of East African Albinos

Susie Bucaro

Follow this and additional works at: <http://lawcommons.luc.edu/pilr>

 Part of the [Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons](#), and the [Human Rights Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Susie Bucaro, *A Black Market for Magical Bones: The Current Plight of East African Albinos*, 15 Pub. Interest L. Rptr. 131 (2010).
Available at: <http://lawcommons.luc.edu/pilr/vol15/iss2/8>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by LAW eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Public Interest Law Reporter by an authorized administrator of LAW eCommons. For more information, please contact law-library@luc.edu.

A BLACK MARKET FOR MAGICAL BONES: THE CURRENT PLIGHT OF EAST AFRICAN ALBINOS

by SUSIE BUCARO

In 2009, more than 20 East African albinos were murdered.¹ Their bodies entered a regional market piloted by witchdoctors, where albino body parts are bought and sold as magic charms.²

The killings began in 2007.³ Since then, more than 50 albinos have been killed,⁴ and in Tanzania, more than 10,000 people have been displaced from their homes.⁵ Although the Tanzanian government has sentenced a handful of albino killers to death, little has been done to protect albinos from future outbreaks of violence.⁶ As one Tanzanian put it, albinos have become “refugees in

their own country.”⁷ In the face of a mostly apathetic local government, some albinos may be forced to survive by becoming refugees somewhere else.

A HISTORY OF DISCRIMINATION

Although albino-targeted killings began within the last three years, discrimination against albinos in East Africa is not a recent phenomenon.⁸ Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, albinos have historically been ostracized because they look different.⁹ George Ngaweje is a 16-year-old albino, living in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.¹⁰ Although his mother does not suffer from albinism, she gave birth to three children who do: George, his brother and his sister.¹¹ George believes that albinos are treated unfairly because of their skin color.¹² “Some of the albinos are killed,” he says, “without any reason.”¹³

Albinos, or people with albinism, suffer from a genetically inherited disorder that results in an absence of pigmentation in a person’s hair, skin and eyes.¹⁴ As a result, people with albinism are extremely sensitive to the sun.¹⁵ Furthermore, albinism oftentimes results in an abnormal development of the retina, causing many albinos to suffer from a significant visual impairment.¹⁶

For an East African albino, especially one who is poor, these handicaps are severely limiting. If the person cannot afford glasses to help his or her vision problems, he or she is unlikely to succeed in school and will probably drop out.¹⁷ An uneducated albino is forced to find work in menial day-labor jobs under the scorching sub-Saharan sun.¹⁸ As a result, these day-laborers often die prematurely of skin cancer.¹⁹ These health factors have contributed to the stigmatization of African albinos because East African society tends to ostracize those with physical defects as “worthless.”²⁰

Cultural superstitions in Tanzania that these health problems are the result of curses make matters even worse. George believes that the violence toward albinos in Tanzania is caused by cultural and traditional practices.²¹

Tanzanian albinos have traditionally been stigmatized in their communities as omens of disaster.²² In some regions, albino children are believed to be the ghosts of European colonists.²³ A husband might divorce his wife if she gives birth to an albino child, accusing her of having an affair with a white man.²⁴ As a result, many albino children are raised by a single parent, which presents

another obstacle – a financial one – to providing the child with basic needs and an education.²⁵ Even those albinos who do receive an education are often discriminated against in the workplace and not considered for promotions.²⁶

As for George, he intends to complete secondary school and attend a university in the hopes of someday becoming an engineer.²⁷ He recognizes, however, that societal discrimination against albinos poses a limitation on his dream.²⁸ How does he feel about it? “Sad,” George says, and “afraid.”²⁹

As an albino in Tanzania, George certainly is not alone. Albinism is relatively common in Tanzania, and therefore this discrimination affects a large group of people. In East Africa, among the countries of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, one out of every 3,000 children is born with albinism. Comparatively, in the United States, only one in 20,000 babies are born albino.³⁰ The difference is simply genetic: a mutation has found its way into the East African population, and the result has been a striking number of albino births.³¹ Currently, there are an estimated 17,000 people living with albinism in Tanzania.³²

THE ROLE OF WITCHDOCTORS

Beginning in 2007, local Tanzanian witchdoctors began marketing potions made of albino blood, shoes made from albino skin and other objects intertwined with albino hair or comprised of albino body parts.³³ The witchdoctors advertised these objects as tokens guaranteed to make people rich.³⁴ The marketing campaign was successful, and within a year a complete dismembered albino body could sell for \$75,000.³⁵

The reasons behind this “get-rich-quick-by-killing-an-albino” scheme are unclear.³⁶ Robert Bundala, an Assistant Lecturer in language teaching from Mwanza, Tanzania has one answer: “Poverty is the main cause of all this. The global economic meltdown has turned thousands of people into believing that only through [this type of activity] they can sustain their livelihood.”³⁷

Nicholas Okungu, from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, has a simple answer for why people are killing albinos: “For their bones.”³⁸ Okungu, an 18-year-old high school student, tells of an albino who came to his school seeking refuge from his fellow villagers, who were hunting him.³⁹ Okungu can remember hearing

about albino-targeted violence years ago.⁴⁰ He thinks the problem is more severe in rural areas, where people have less money and are less educated.⁴¹

Raymond Mosha, a professor of International Exchange at DePaul University in Chicago, agrees with Okungu.⁴² Born and raised in Moshi, Tanzania, Mosha believes that the violence is mostly in the villages.⁴³ “Urban populations,” he says, “are better protected than rural ones by police.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, albinos living in urban areas receive the additional protection of living among a more educated population. Urban areas, Mosha continues, have “populations that do not easily succumb to this kind of belief that albino parts make people rich.”⁴⁵

The problem, however, is not limited to rural areas. It has permeated the urban centers of Tanzania as well, perhaps because this is where “wealth-hungry” people, as Bundala calls them, reside.⁴⁶ It is not uncommon to hear a crowd harassing an albino in the city by yelling *Dili! Dili!*, a Swahili play on the word “deal.”⁴⁷ What the exclamation “deal” means, Okungu explains, is that an albino represents a deal or a bargain, an opportunity to pocket a financial benefit.⁴⁸

This financial incentive to murder albinos is a result of what Mosha calls witchdoctor malpractice.⁴⁹ “People believe the indigenous doctors,” states Mosha, “because traditionally these people have had some healing power – good healing power – so they command considerable authority in the community.”⁵⁰

Whatever the cause may be – poverty, superstition, ignorance or greed – as of November 2009, the official death toll from albino-targeted violence surpassed 50.⁵¹ The Tanzanian Albino Society reported that most of the victims of these murders are women and children with albinism.⁵²

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

In October 2008, the President of Tanzania, Jakaya Kikwete, condemned the albino killings, saying they were based on a “stupid belief.”⁵³ The following month, the Tanzanian government declared it a capital crime to kill albinos.⁵⁴ Since then, more than 170 people have been arrested for albino killings in

Tanzania, but very few have been prosecuted.⁵⁵ The Tanzanian courts cite a lack of funds for litigation as the reason for the delay.⁵⁶

Mosha believes that the local government response has been inadequate.⁵⁷ “The Tanzanian government should do much more to protect albinos,” he says.⁵⁸ Mosha suggests that the government should “educate the rural masses about the folly and danger of these beliefs, register and supervise all doctors and prosecute all who break the law.”⁵⁹

In September 2009, four men were sentenced to death for murdering an albino boy – the first such ruling in Tanzania.⁶⁰ Two months later, the Tanzanian courts sentenced four additional men to death by hanging for their participation in killing albinos.⁶¹ None of those convicted have actually been executed because President Kikwete has yet to sign the execution orders.⁶²

George Ngaweje has a message for Kikwete: “If I could get a chance to say something to the president of Tanzania about the violence toward albinos, I [would] say . . . that [the] government should put more effort to protect albinos through instruments like the army and police.”⁶³ He continues, “the government should give education to people so that they stop killing albinos.”⁶⁴

George dreams of a Tanzania where albinos can live comfortably, without any fear of insecurity.⁶⁵ In light of the generally apathetic government response to the problem, however, it appears that safety for albinos in Tanzania might remain just a dream for quite some time.

THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

In 2008, Peter Ash, a Canadian with albinism, founded a non-governmental organization in Canada called Under the Same Sun. The organization is dedicated to eradicating albino-targeted violence in East Africa.⁶⁶ One way Under the Same Sun seeks to reduce the violence against albinos is by embarrassing the Tanzanian government into action.⁶⁷ Ash believes the government is worried about tourism and its image, and as a result “is trying to keep a lid on [the problem].”⁶⁸

Ash visited the United Nations in February 2009 with the hopes of pressuring the UN to hire a special prosecutor for the killings.⁶⁹ Following Ash’s visit, the



For an African Albino, it appears that safety might remain just a dream for quite some time.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stated that he was “very sad to hear what is happening in Tanzania” and that the UN will “support initiatives by Tanzanian authorities to address the issue.”⁷⁰ Beyond condemning the killings, however, the Secretary General did not offer any economic assistance to help prosecute the criminals, nor did he promise to exert any pressure on the Tanzanian government to be more proactive in resolving the problem.⁷¹

In light of the response by the international community, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) has called the plight of albinos in East Africa “a silent emergency.”⁷² The IFRC issued an advocacy report in November 2009, pressuring East African governments to provide better legal protection for people with albinism.⁷³ The IFRC further promised to continue its own

efforts, mobilizing international support to alleviate albino-targeted violence in the region.⁷⁴

SEEKING REFUGE ELSEWHERE

In the absence of strong local and international support, some albinos have taken measures into their own hands by leaving the region. Abdoulaye Coulibaly arrived in the Spanish Canary islands illegally by boat in April 2009 and became the first albino man to be granted asylum in Spain.⁷⁵

Local lawyers call it a success and hope Coulibaly's case will help other albino people seeking refuge.⁷⁶ The Spanish Interior Ministry, however, rejected an asylum application of another albino, finding that the daily discrimination he suffered in Nigeria did not amount to "persecution."⁷⁷

In the United States, albinos seeking asylum must demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of membership in a particular social group.⁷⁸ In order to establish membership in a particular social group, the applicant must establish that the group is facing persecution based on an immutable characteristic, shared in common.⁷⁹ The question is whether a genetic disorder, such as albinism, qualifies. In Coulibaly's case, the Spanish Interior Ministry answered that question affirmatively: persecution based on albinism qualifies a person for asylum.⁸⁰

Bundala mentioned an albino man he knows who carries a whistle with him to blow for help any time he suspects his life is in danger.⁸¹ Perhaps a solution to the problem requires more people, like Peter Ash, to be the whistle-blowers, drawing the attention of the international community to the current plight of East African albinos.

Meanwhile, George, the 16-year-old albino boy from Dar es Salaam, is not looking to the Tanzanian government or the international community to safeguard his life. Nor is he carrying a whistle to call for help. Instead, George has another strategy to keep him safe. "Always," he says, "I pray to God so that he can protect me from this bad situation."⁸²

NOTES

- 1 Amnesty Int'l USA, *Four Tanzanians Sentenced to Death for Killing an Albino Man*, AMNESTY INT'L USA, Nov. 3, 2009, available at <http://www.amnestyusa.org>.
- 2 Donald McNeil, Jr., *Bid to Stop the Killing of Albinos*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 16, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/17/health/17albi.html>.
- 3 Andrei Engstrand-Neascu & Alex Wynter, *Through Albino Eyes: The Plight of Albino People in Africa's Great Lakes Region and a Red Cross Response*, Nov. 2009, available at <http://www.ifrc.org/docs/pubs/discrimination/AlbinoPDF4.pdf>.
- 4 Jody Ray Bennett, *Tanzania: East Africa's Albino Underworld*, NGO NEWS AFRICA, Dec. 15, 2009, available at <http://www.ngonewsafrika.org/2009/12/tanzania-east-africas-albino-underworld.html>.
- 5 ASSOCIATED PRESS MSNBC, *Albinos in Africa Fear for Lives after Killings*, Nov. 28, 2009, available at <http://www.msnbc.com/id/34182250>.
- 6 Bennett, *supra* note 4.
- 7 Email Interview with Robert Bundala, Asst. Lecturer Specialized in language teaching in Mwanza, Tanz. (Feb. 24, 2010).
- 8 Engstrand-Neascu & Wynter, *supra* note 3; ASSOCIATED PRESS MSNBC, *supra* note 5.
- 9 Jeffrey Gettleman, *Albinos, Long Shunned, Face Threat in Tanzania*, N.Y. TIMES, June 8, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/world/africa/08albino.html>.
- 10 Email Interview with George Charles Ngaweje, High School Student, Loyola High School in Dar es Salaam, Tanz. (Mar. 3, 2010).
- 11 *Id.*
- 12 *Id.*
- 13 *Id.*
- 14 *Persons with Albinism in Tanzania: What We Are Doing to Help*, UNDER THE SAME SUN, <http://www.underthesamesun.com/home.php> (last visited Mar. 2, 2010).
- 15 *Id.*
- 16 *What is Albinism?*, NAT'L ORG. FOR ALBINISM & HYPOPIGMENTATION, http://www.albinism.org/publications/what_is_albinism.html (last visited Mar. 2, 2010).
- 17 ASSOCIATED PRESS MSNBC, *supra* note 5.
- 18 *Id.*
- 19 *Id.*
- 20 *Id.*
- 21 Email Interview with George Charles Ngaweje, *supra* note 10.
- 22 *Id.*
- 23 Bennett, *supra* note 4.
- 24 Engstrand-Neascu & Wynter, *supra* note 3; ASSOCIATED PRESS MSNBC, *supra* note 5.
- 25 Engstrand-Neascu & Wynter, *supra* note 3.
- 26 ASSOCIATED PRESS MSNBC, *supra* note 5.
- 27 Email Interview with George Charles Ngaweje, *supra* note 10.
- 28 *Id.*
- 29 *Id.*
- 30 McNeil, *supra* note 2.
- 31 *Id.*
- 32 *Id.*
- 33 Engstrand-Neascu & Wynter, *supra* note 3; McNeil, *supra* note 2.
- 34 McNeil, *supra* note 2.

- 35 ASSOCIATED PRESS MSNBC, *supra* note 5.
- 36 Email Interview with Robert Bundala, *supra* note 7.
- 37 *Id.*
- 38 Email Interview with Nicholas Constantine Okungu, High School Student, in Dar es Salaam, Tanz. (Mar. 1, 2010).
- 39 *Id.*
- 40 *Id.*
- 41 *Id.*
- 42 Email Interview with Raymond S. Mosha, International Exchange Professor, DePaul University in Chi., Ill. (Mar. 4, 2010).
- 43 *Id.*
- 44 *Id.*
- 45 *Id.*
- 46 Email Interview with Robert Bundala, *supra* note 7.
- 47 Email Interview with Nicholas Constantine Okungu, *supra* note 38.
- 48 *Id.*
- 49 Email Interview with Raymond S. Mosha, *supra* note 42.
- 50 *Id.*
- 51 Bennett, *supra* note 4.
- 52 *Albinos Reportedly Killed for Body Parts*, AMNESTY INT’L USA, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/allcountries/tanzania/page.do?id=1011252>, (last visited Mar. 2, 2010).
- 53 Bennett, *supra* note 4.
- 54 *UNICEF Sounds Alarm after Brutal Murder of Albino Girl in Burundi*, UNITED NATIONS, Nov. 18, 2008, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=28991&Cr=burundi&Cr1>.
- 55 McNeil, *supra* note 2; *Stop Albino Slaughter in Tanzania*, NAT’L ORG. FOR ALBINISM & HYPOPIGMENTATION, <http://sas.albinism.org>, (last visited Mar. 2, 2010).
- 56 *Id.*
- 57 Email Interview with Raymond S. Mosha, *supra* note 42.
- 58 *Id.*
- 59 *Id.*
- 60 BBC NEWS, *Albino Killers Get the Death Penalty*, Nov. 2, 2009, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8338838.stm>.
- 61 *Id.*
- 62 Bennett, *supra* note 4.
- 63 Email Interview with George Charles Ngaweje, *supra* note 10.
- 64 *Id.*
- 65 *Id.*
- 66 McNeil, *supra* note 2.
- 67 *Id.*
- 68 *Id.*
- 69 *Id.*
- 70 UNDER THE SAME SUN, *supra* note 14.
- 71 *Id.*
- 72 Bennett, *supra* note 4.
- 73 Engstrand-Neascu & Wynter, *supra* note 3.
- 74 *Id.*
- 75 Sarah Rainsford, *Mali Albino Given Spanish Asylum ‘Fled Discrimination,’* BBC NEWS, Dec. 23, 2009, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8428688.stm>.

76 *Id.*

77 *Id.*

78 *Matter of Acosta*, 19 I&N Dec. 211, 214-15 (BIA 1985).

79 *Id.*

80 Rainsford, *supra* note 75.

81 Email Interview with Robert Bundala, *supra* note 7.

82 Email Interview with George Charles Ngaweje, *supra* note 10.